



Soil and soul
and
Konkani tales

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THE GIRL WITH GOLDEN HAIR

One day, a boy was throwing stones at frogs in the village well, when he noticed something shining in the water. He fished it out, and to his great surprise found that it was a beautiful, long golden hair.

"How beautiful must be the girl who has such golden hair;" he exclaimed. "Such a one shall be my bride, a girl with golden hair."

He ran home immediately, and showing the hair to his mother he told her of his desire to marry a girl with golden hair. The mother smiled at the foolish desire of her son, and putting back the dishevelled locks of hair that were hanging over his eyes, she told him to keep such foolish thoughts out of his mind.

But this was no passing fancy of the boy. He was quite serious and determined to get such a one as his bride, and he pleaded with his mother day and night and would listen to no excuse. He would not rest till she promised that she would fetch him such a bride.

The helpless mother filled a winnowing fan with gold coins, gave it to her negro female servant and told her to go round the whole country from door to door and offer the gold in exchange for a girl with golden hair.

The negro servant went from door to door crying out:

Take this much of gold, folks,
And give my master a girl with golden hair.

But the search was in vain, and the servant returned home with the winnowing fan full of gold coins and without the bride. The boy was sad beyond words and refused to be consoled. He fell ill and pined with grief.

The parents did not know what to do to save the life of their son. The doctors shook their head and said there was no help. They had no remedy for the disease of his imaginary love.

The hair which the boy had found in the well happened to be from the head of his own sister who had golden hair. So the parents decided that the only way to save their son from death was to marry him to their own daughter. When the boy was told that he would be married to a girl with golden hair, he verily jumped from his bed and was wild with joy.

Preparations were at once begun for the marriage. One evening, the girl, his sister went to fetch a handmill from their neighbour. She was passing through the kitchen when the cat which was sitting near the fire-place began saying: "Shame! Shame, a girl is going to marry her brother. Shame Shame!" The innocent girl was surprised at the words of the cat, and when the old woman of the house came up, the girl asked her why the cat was laughing and crying shame on her.

"Listen, child," said the woman, "your brother is going to marry you soon, and it's no good, my child. A boy never marries his own sister and a girl never marries her own brother."

"What am I to do then, Granny? How can I avoid it?" she asked the old woman.

"You must not marry him, child," said the woman.

"But how? What am I to do?" the girl asked her.

"Fear not, child, I will help you" said the woman. "Take this seed and plant it by the side of the village well. When all are asleep in the house, go to the well and you will find

there a great tree. Climb it and hide yourself among the branches."

The girls did as the old woman had told her. She planted the seed by the side of the well, and in the night a tall tree sprang up. When her mother and father and brother were asleep, she got up and without the slightest noise went from the house to the well. The moon shone bright in the blue sky, and its rays peeped in and out of the leaves. She climbed the tree and hid herself high up.

The next day, the parents missed their daughter. They looked for her all over the village and the country; but she was nowhere to be found.

That evening, the servant of the house went to fetch water from the village well. As she was drawing water, she noticed three distinct shadows floating on the water. She lowered the pot and tugged at it to let the water enter through the mouth.

"This is my shadow; that is the shadow of the tree; but whose is that other shadow?" she asked herself.

Distracted by these thoughts, she jerked the pot out of the water and in doing so struck it against the side of the well and the vessel broke into pieces. She threw away the broken vessel and went home to fetch a stronger one.

Again she bent forward to draw water, and again she saw the three moving shadows, and she said to herself: "This is my shadow, this the shadow of the tree; but whose shadow is that other one?" Even as she mused, the vessel struck against the side and the water fell into the well. Throwing away the broken rim, she hurried home again to bring a stronger one.

The girl who was sitting among the branches of the tree watched her servant and was amused by the scene created by her shadow. When the servant began a third time to ask herself. "Whose shadow is that other one?" and struck the vessel against the side of the well, the girl could not contain herself and burst into a loud peal of laughter.

The servant looked up to where the laughter came from and discovered to her surprise and joy her young

mistress hiding among the branches.

"So that was your shadow after all!" she exclaimed. And without wasting any more words she ran home to tell the glad news that her young mistress who had disappeared so mysteriously was safe and so very close by.

The old father and mother and their son rushed to the well. A crowd had already gathered at the foot of the tree.

"Come down, come down," they all shouted. But instead of coming down the frightened girl went higher and higher. The brother climbed after her, and the parents from below shouted kind words to their daughter and the mother wept in fear that she might fall to the ground. The girl climbed recklessly till she swayed perilously on a thin branch, while at every instant her brother came closer and closer to her.

Helpless and with big tears in her eyes, she looked up to heaven for help and saw the bright moon shining in the sky, and cried, "Uncle Moon, Uncle Moon, help me. Take me up to heaven, and I will be thy bride."

The moon taking pity on the beautiful girl crying to him in her distress dropped her a long ray-rope and took her up. And all who were standing at the foot of the tree saw the girl disappear high up into the clouds.

There were great rejoicings in heaven when the girl from the earth arrived in the palace of the moon. She was dressed in regal robes of blue and decked with many stars, and the light of the milky way trailed behind her. There had never been such music and rejoicing in the heavens as when the moon married the beautiful earth-girl with golden hair.

For many years the girl lived a happy life in the palace of the moon. One day, as she was pricking the pimples which covered the back of the moon, she remembered her home on the earth, her father and mother and brother and all the village folk. Tears came to her eyes as she thought of the happy years she had spent on the earth and they rolled down her cheeks and fell on the back of the moon. Before she could wipe them away, the moon had turned

round and asked her why she was weeping.

"My dear," said the girl, "for ten long years I have not seen my father and mother and brother and I long to go down to the earth and see them once again," saying which a fresh gush of tears came to her eyes.

The moon tried to comfort her and told her that if she went down to her home, her parents would not let her escape and come back to him. But the girl replied, "I will go and see them in the guise of a *mahar*. I shall paint my body with black soot and with a basket under my arm and a knife in my hand I will go and see them."

The moon let her have her wish and lowered her down in her village and the girl walked towards her home. She went up to the gate of the backyard, and asked the servant if they had any mending of old mats to be done. The servant who seemed to hear a familiar voice but saw a strange face called the *mahar* and gave her few old things to be mended.

The girl was glad to see once again the faces of her parents and her brother and she asked the servant how everything was in the village. The servant watched her at work and noticed that she often cut her fingers like one who was new to the job.

The church bell rang the stroke of mid-day, and the servant came with a pot of rice and another of curry for the *mahar*. She also brought a small pot of water for her.

"Come, wash your hands," she said, and as she poured some water on the hands of the *mahar*, she noticed that they grew white. Her suspicions were now fully roused and she threw the water on the face of the *mahar*. The soot was instantly washed away, and the servant shouted her discovery and called out loudly for her master and mistress. Hearing the cries of the servant, the father and the mother and the brother rushed out of the house, but the *mahar* girl was too quick for them. She escaped from the backyard, shouting as she ran, "Take me up, take me up, beloved," and before her parents could catch her, she was already taken up by the moon.